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FM AMEMBASSY TIRANA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 7954
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE IMMEDIATE
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE IMMEDIATE 2460

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TIRANA 000160

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR EUR/SCE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/09/2019

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [AL](#)

SUBJECT: SOCIALIST PARTY TO CALL FOR POSTPONEMENT OF
ELECTIONS?

Classified By: POL/ECON CHIEF PAUL POLETES FOR REASONS 1.4 (b) AND (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: As the June 28 Parliamentary elections approach, early polling gives the opposition Socialist Party (SP) a slight lead over the ruling Democratic Party. Nevertheless, the SP has serious concerns about the GOA's ability to issue voter ID cards to the voters who require them. Citing numerous missed deadlines with the issuance of voter IDs, a senior SP strategist told us that the SP will decide in mid-April whether to ask the GOA to postpone the elections, boycott them, or go along with a flawed electoral process. The SP is still hammering out its strategy for victory, but expects to win 63-65 parliamentary seats, which means it would have to go into a coalition to garner the 71 seats necessary for victory. While it would seem that the left should be able to roll to victory against the scandal ridden Berisha government, divisions on the left, particularly between Ilir Meta of the Movement for Integration (LSI) and SP leader Edi Rama, have stymied any hopes of unification. SP strategists have hinted that Meta may even be looking to deal with the DP after the elections in order to cobble together a non-Edi Rama lead government. While the invective is certainly heating up, the complaints about the GOA's inability to produce voter ID cards and accurate voter lists are valid, opening the door to potential electoral fraud. This is the first we have heard of a potential postponement or boycotting of the elections from a senior SP official, something that does not bode well for these closely watched elections. End summary.

ISN'T THIS THE LEFT'S YEAR?

¶2. (C) While it would seem that the left should be able to roll to an easy victory against the scandal-ridden Berisha government (Gerdec, one Minister and one former Minister under indictment and another recently fired from office are but four of the current scandals), internal divisions threaten any chances of an outright victory by the left. The left is divided into two main groups: the larger SP lead by Tirana Mayor Edi Rama, and the smaller LSI which is lead by former Socialist PM Ilir Meta. Ever the bitter rivals, no love is lost between Meta and Rama, and while much has been made about a possible unification of the two, it does not appear that LSI and SP will be able to bridge their differences prior to the election. Instead, Meta's main goal seems to be to drive a wedge between Edi Rama and the SP rank and file, while Rama is determined to drive LSI out of business.

POLLS GIVE SP THE EARLY ADVANTAGE

¶3. (C) Early polling shows the SP ahead. A national Zogby poll released on March 10 showed the SP at 39 percent, the DP at 34 percent, LSI at 5 percent, and SP coalition partner G-99 at 2 percent. On March 11, G-99 Chair Erion Veliaj told

PolOffs that internal SP polling done on a regional basis shows the SP winning 65-70 seats by itself, and coalition partner G-99 pulling in another 5-6 seats, with other SP coalition partners garnering another 2-3 seats, enough to give an SP coalition a slim majority in the parliament. (NOTE: Regional polling, as opposed to national polls, give a more accurate view of potential election outcomes in that for these elections Albania has been divided into 12 electoral districts. END NOTE).

SO HOW DOES THE SP PLAN TO WIN?

14. (C) In order to win a majority in the Parliament, and therefore be able to choose the Prime Minister, a party must win 71 of 140 seats. According to the most optimistic scenario for the SP from one of its chief strategists and MPs, Kastriot Islami, the SP could in a best-case scenario win 71-73 seats. However, Islami and most other observers believe that 63-65 seats is more realistic. With just over two months before the election, the SP is still formulating its electoral strategy and platform, according to Islami. For now, Islami said the SP is holding regional roundtables centered on ten issues including unemployment, corruption, the economy, health, education, and the environment. Islami said that the SP is currently spending most of its time and money fighting political battles about voter ID cards and the voter registry, rather than focusing on the issues.

PRE-ELECTION BATTLES

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15. (C) Voter IDs and the voter registry are the keys to free and fair elections, according to Islami. The GOA, in his view, is far, far behind in the issuance of voter ID cards. The GOA has quietly dropped its promise to issue up to three million IDs prior to the election, and now says it will focus on giving ID cards to the approximately 700,000 people who do not have a passport. (NOTE: According to the new electoral law, a new biometric ID or valid passport are the only acceptable forms of ID for the upcoming elections. END NOTE). The SP says that the number of voters without a passport is closer to one million, and Islami is concerned that these voters, more likely to be SP sympathizers according to Islami, will be disenfranchised by the slow moving GOA. The GOA has postponed the start of the ID issuing process three times since January. It also pledged that by March 1, the ID card process would have begun in all municipalities with at least 5,000 inhabitants, however only about ten percent of the 200 municipalities that fit this criteria have begun issuing IDs. Elderly and/or rural voters are most at risk of being disenfranchised since they may not have the time, money, or health to travel, wait in line for hours, and pay EUR 10 for the ID.

16. (C) The SP sees rural areas as having the highest propensity for electoral fraud. Fraud in remote, hard to reach places could turn the election in the DP's favor, according to Islami, especially since election monitors will likely be unable to monitor these areas closely. He offered that rural voters know all too well about the failures of the Berisha government since they live in such poverty, and suggested that they would turn out en masse for the SP.

POSTPONE THE ELECTIONS, BOYCOTT THEM, OR WHAT?

17. (C) The SP is so concerned about the potential for fraudulent or unfair elections, that it may even consider asking the GOA to postpone the elections. Islami told Poloff that the SP will monitor GOA progress on election preparation very closely over the next month to determine what course of action it should take. According to Islami, the SP has three options: ask the GOA to postpone the elections (which only

the GOA has the authority to do), not participate at all (this would render the elections meaningless), or proceed to participate in elections that will be neither free nor fair, according to the SP. Any of these choices would bring the international community down hard on Albania, especially as it would have entered NATO by this point, according to Islami. He said the SP has not yet decided what to do, but will make a decision in mid April about its approach.

18. (C) Comment: The fact that the SP does not have a coherent electoral strategy at this time is normal given the nature of Albanian elections, which technically only allow campaigning to begin 45 days before the election. At this point, all parties are still working on internal organization issues and are preparing for internal party elections, which are expected in April. Despite this, one SP member told us he is frustrated with the SP's lack of election organization and Rama's "micromanagement." The SP's concerns about the failure of the GOA to prepare adequately for the elections are well grounded, given the repeated delays with the ID card process. However, Islami's statement that the SP may consider asking for the elections to be postponed, sit them out, or allow the old forms of ID to be used for voting is very concerning and it is the first time we have heard anyone mention this as a possibility. Any one of these three options could turn the elections into either a political farce or technical disaster.

WITHERS